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The American Jockey, 1875 - 1910

This paper examines a major sporting professional who has received little attention by historians: the jockey. It focuses on the period from the first running of the Kentucky Derby through the (temporary) closing of New York race tracks in 1910. While scholars have given a great deal of attention to professional baseball players and boxers, and less attention to basketball and football players, there are few biographical studies of jockeys.

This essay briefly considers the careers of such top jockeys as Murphy, Sloan, Snapper Garrison, and Walter Miller (a teenage Jewish jockey who held the record for most victories in a season which lasted for over fifty years), but it primarily focuses on the occupation in general. It examines the social origins of jockeys (poor farmboys?), the process of training and apprenticeship (many top riders were mere youths, who rode at under 75 lbs.), the work of the jockey, their compensation, their status, their ties to gamblers like Pittsburgh Phil, and their integrity. Special attention is paid to the changing status of the occupation as horsemen and changes in long-standing beliefs about the role of jockeys in winning races. Before the period under study many presumed that the best horse won regardless of the rider, but this changed as owners and bettors realized the vital role of jockeys who used new techniques such as the monkey style of riding. Top jockeys were in big demand by trainers and owners who paid top dollar to sign them up. They were among the highest paid athletes in the United States, socialized, or at least did business with elite individuals, and were recruited by British nobility to work for them at the turn of the century. American jockeys became recognized as the best in the world, and

dominated English racing to such an extent that the British horsemen tried to force them out. Finally, this paper explains why African American jockeys disappeared from the racing circuit in the early 1900s. Historically major figures in the sport in the nineteenth century, Black jockeys had been major players in antebellum and postbellum racing, winning several Kentucky Derbies, for instance. However, the racing status of the sport, the high pay offered jockeys, and the rising tide of Jim Crow pushed African Americans out of the jockey silks, into a low paying, low status role as grooms and exercise boys. This development reflected the broader pattern of discrimination in *fin-de-siecle* America, as well as the prejudice exhibited in other professional sports like baseball and cycling, where they were similarly forced out.

The paper is based on extensive reading of Chicago and New York newspapers from the 1870s to the 1920s, sporting periodicals like the *Spirit of the Times* (1860-1902), and *Turf Field, and Farm*, and general periodicals like *Harper's Weekly*.